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Network Of Spies

WASHINGTON
Which TV network will win top ratings this fall? Answer: The one that comes up with the most far-fetched spy thriller.

ABC, suffering from defections of older viewers, and expert in father-son, husband-wife detective teams, will enter the lists with "Father Spies Best," the warm, human, fast-paced story of a typical American family of espionage agents.

There will be a sitcom (a comedy watched in the Situation Room) revolving around the adventures of an armed-services family that augments its pay by selling secrets for hard cash. Here is private enterprise in action, without those ideological hangups of "The Rosenbergs" and other family-spy series of a generation ago. Featured will be the studious father, errant brother, madcap son and the dingbat mother who turns them all in.

CBS, in its romantic tradition of "Dallas" and "Knots Landing," believes that love and money conquers all. Black Rock will soap up the evening schedule with "Infiltrating Each Other" (alternative title: "Los Angeles") about an F.B.I. agent who falls in love with a beautiful K.G.B. agent, wife of another Soviet operative; the K.G.B. husband, putting duty before marital fidelity, urges his wife to seduce the F.B.I. man, who in turn is willing to break a few rules of his own in hopes of using this poor woman to infiltrate the K.G.B. and thereby to become Director Webster's Agent of the Month. (Efrem Zimbalist Jr. will not star.)

NBC, appealing in high style to the vid-yuppies with heroes who never tuck in their shirts, will get a Miami Vice-like grip on its new series set in Paris and Auckland, "Le Département de Mauvais Tours" (originally titled "Four Frogmen and a Girl," but "Frogman" was rejected lest it be taken as a slur).

The central character of "Mauvais Tours" (that's French for "dirty tricks") is Captain Dominique, the woman who puts the provocation in *agent provocateur*. Clad in a bikini and accompanied by four handsome rubber-fetishists, she is assigned to blow up Redwar, the boat commandeered by crazed environmentalists on the lam to New Zealand. When the plot misfires (marine explosions are always handled better by ABC), the President of France appoints a patriot to cover up our heroine's exploits. But cool Dominique soon turns from Jeanne d'Arc to John Dean and brings down the Government.

PBS, devoted to low-key, nonviolent drama and adept at capturing the nuances of nagging nannies, will present 13 weeks of subtle tuggings-and-haulings between the East and West German intelligence services.

"Schmeiley's Volken" is a leisurely examination of the motives of a Bonn counterspy chief (upstairs) and his typing pool (downstairs) in the Federal Office for the Defense of the Constitution, a nest of weinbrand-besotted, debt-ridden euphemists.

Schmeiley, world-weary spyocrat, defects to the East, burning 168 allied agents and demonstrating to NATO that West German intelligence remains a security risk. The last chancellor so embarrassed was forced to resign; the current Chancellor, hero of Bitburg, desperately seeks to push the blame onto a rightist political rival. For viewers lost in the complexities of this espionage chess, Alistair Cooke will explain everything.

Home Box Office brings cable customers in from the cold with an original movie for television exploiting its need for foreign locations to enhance worldwide sales.

HBO's "Excuse My Dust" is set in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Trusted cleaning women, secretly equipped with powder puffs supplied by the K.G.B., dust all the doorknobs and bedposts with a carcinogenic yellow powder scented with *Suivez-Moi*.

Caught in the act by American public-diplomacy agents, the Russian cleaning women refuse to sign an environmental-impact statement and stick to their cover story: Their yellow K.G.B. follow-me powder leaves Spaso House furniture looking lovelier longer than lemon-scented Pride.

As the viewer punches the buttons on his remote-control dialer, leaping from one ludicrously-fictional espionage drama to the next, he will wonder why every program this season has a spy plot. What happened to the old sitcoms and shoot-'em-ups?

The only people who know why spy plots are so prevalent today are those who get better TV reception than anybody. Although the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board cannot find out why, the new Soviet Embassy in Washington sits high atop "Dobrynin's Hill" and its huge antenna picks up every one of those spy programs loud and clear, along with all our telephone calls.

While Westerners vie for position to become the network of spies, the Russians grab top ratings on their own web of deceit. □